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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socialization and enculturation process by which one becomes a school board member, using adult socialization and small group theory to construct a model of the role personalization process. Thirteen new school board members in seven Arizona school districts were interviewed indepth, from the announcement of their candidacy until their first anniversary in office, and information was also gathered from interviews with superintendents, attendence at meetings, and documents. The model of school board member enculturation identified in this study involves five phases. To enter the enculturation process, members must go through rites of passage, involving three stages: candidate, member-elect, and oath of office. Second, the new members become aware of the traditions of consensual voting, team concept, and not raising embarrassing questions. Third, members learn the trade, becoming knowledgeable in three basic areas: technical, cognitive, and self-analytic. Fourth, they gain familiarity, insight, and tolerance regarding the groups they interact with. Finally, the members become a cohesive group as they receive common stimuli, are influenced by other board members, learn to act in public, and respond to the constituency. The study concludes with recommendations for further research. (DCS)

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BECOMING A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER: THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES

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Most school board members come into their positions on the governing board with very little experience to guide them in their political roles (Cistone, 1977; Lutz, 1980). It is known that they often enter the position with little familiarity about school law, the teaching-learning process, schools as organizations, school finance, and general school board tradition.

Yet, they often manifest behaviors which are endemic to school board members (Campbell, Cunnningham, & McPhee, 1965; Lutz, 1980; Parelius, 1982). They tend to meet in private to work out appppropriate solutions to vexing school problems and they generally try to come to their decisions with resolutions that they perceive as good for the majority of the public school students they serve. Often, they vote policies unanimously and in public and they tend to avoid any behavior which would align them with particular interest groups (Cistone, 1977; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz, 1980). Lutz states that they are guided in their actions by the "culture of school boards."

The purpose of this paper will be to explicate the processes by which new school board members come to accept what Lutz (1980) has called the "culture of school boards," using the theoretical constructs of adult socialization and small groups to establish a perspective from which the enculturation process may be viewed. Utilizing these theoretical frameworks, as well as a category system which emerges from the data, a model of the role personalization process will be outlined and explained. The data was collected from thirteen

new school board members in seven Arizona school districts who were interviewed in depth from their announcement of candidacy until their first anniversary in office. The process by which one is enculturated and socialized into what has been called a school board culture were determined through responses from a series of five partially structured open-ended interviews with each of the new trustees. Data were gathered from October 1980 through November 1981 and encompassed early candidacy, the period when each was a member-elect, and during selected times of the first 11 months in office. Besides the responses gained from the interviews with candidates and new school board members, interviews with superintendents in several districts including the seven districts from which the sample is drawn, information gathered from attendance at public forums, training and orientation activities, media documents, and other artifacts acquired during the period encompassing the study are also used.

If the act of developing, by education, discipline, and training, can be defined as culture building, then there is indeed, as Lutz (1980) argued, a culture of school boards. As a culture, school boards provide for the socialization and enculturation of their members. If the culture exhibited is in relationship to its existence as a small group, it is, as well, a point of reference which cannot be overlooked as incidental. The behaviors must be explained as part of the enculturation process. van Gennep (1960) argues that part of the process of acculturation into a new experience involves rites of

passage. He defines these in terms of stages of passage: preliminal, occurring prior to the entrance into the rite of passage; liminal, when an individual is in the central part of the rite; and post-liminal, as that part of the rite when an individual is fully accepted into the new experience.

These phases are demonstrated as persons wishing to become school board members approach the tasks they are required to accomplish as part of this initiating activity. Some of these tasks are formal and required of them, such as obtaining signatures and filing by a specified date at the county office of government. Also are those tasks that are discretionary, activities allowed in pursuit of attaining a seat on the school board, such as the distribution of posters and brochures, community canvassing, and public information events. After the preliminal occurrences, candidates either win or lose the election. Only the winners are allowed to complete the three stages of the rite. This is then accomplished by serving for a period as members-elect, identified as the liminal stage of the rite. During this period, winners are not legally board members and cannot vote on agenda items. However, they do have more opportunities for practice of the role of school board members, as constituents and significant others, such as other board members and the superintendent find opportunities to interact with them on different levels than when they were candidates. There is a degree of anticipatory socialization during the preliminal and liminal phases as these periods are essentially staging areas where new and potential school board members have opportunities for practice that are similar to an internship.

Members-elect may be seen to be on the cusp of membership as they proceed into the postliminal stage, marked by their acceptance into office as bona fide and legally franchised school board members, a period which is marked by taking the oath of office.

After they become school board members they begin the process of role personalization by becoming educated to school board activites and they begin to learn what it is that needs to be learned about school board membership. According to research in adult socialization (Brim, 1966) and occupational socialization (Moore, 1969), it might be intimated that new school board members begin to acquire the knowledge, skills, and appropriate postures necessary to become "proper" members. They learn the norms of their "occupational" group as school board members, of the goals of consensual voting, of not raising questions in public on an agenda, and of the school board as a team enterprice.

During this first month in office they become aware of these group standards or norms of the school board. They are not exercises in the formal sense of the word; they are, in fact, practices which school board members demonstrate by modeled behavior as well as through pointed discussion. The norms of which new school board members become aware can be called the school board traditions and, as traditions, these particular behaviors serve for purposes of system maintenance and all of the learning norms exemplify unity.

In order to maintain the system, school boards have developed traditions or norms so that whatever the issue, there is an approach

in behavior which is essentially prescribed. The traditions are (a) consensual voting, (b) not raising questions on agenda items in public, and (c) the concept of team. New members become aware of the patterns but at this stage not all are convinced of the efficacy of the standards. Some who make attempts learn by changing or modifying the system by: (a) changing procedures; (b) attaining the majority view; (c) changing existing attitudes in oneself or others; (d) by changing the behaviors of others; (e) by learning to use political strategies; (f) by observation. It is all a fairly eclectic process since it is early in their tenure. They are affected by external forces and change somewhat their perspective on the public and, as a result of being a member of the school board, change their view of the public to <u>they</u>.

It is at this point that one can easily see the circumstances which are drawing upon the new school board members as they seek to find their place in the system of the governing board. They are gaining some sense of their public and engaging in small intrigues which find play as political strategy. It is the beginning of seeing the protocols expected of school board members. It is a tight little group with traditions and standards and norms. There is a beginning of knowledge of who does what. There is also a beginning sense of wanting to really belong to the school board as a group as some early experiences with the constituency dampen their early rapture regarding serving the public. Kerr (1964) and Cistone (1977) called it the apathy of the public which makes the school board response a legitimating one. Actually, in this study, the constituency or parts of it

are hardly apathetic and the behaviors of the public in this context perhaps sends new school board members toward the group for a reaffirmation of their own self-esteem. The constituency also forms as a factor of the socialization of the new school board member.

During these early months new members arrive at a new view of the constituency and learn the costs of being a member as they view itfrom an altogether different perspective and begin to refer to the constituency as "they" and to themselves as "we," and evolve from private citizen to public citizen. They also begin sensing a need for ownership and belonging to the school board group though they do not generally interact socially. Some of them also encounter problems involving old friendships with those persons not a part of the board and some ethical considerations of their new positions in this context.

After deciding what to learn, they set about the task of doing so with some enthusiasm. In the first month on the job they have begun to learn the trade. There is a need for specific knowledge; they discover and, after initial procedural problems are solved, they begin acquiring these facets of specificity. The things they learn seem to fall into three areas--technical, cognitive, and self-analytic--as they are categorized through the interviews.

In a matter of a very short time, new school board members must increase their knowledge about a variety of subjects: legal, education, and philosophical. They must become aware of school finance, personnel factors, and policy. Although the superintendent is there to guide them in their acquisition of knowledge, as are other

board members, the task is still theirs to absorb. They cannot spend time discussing a great many things with other board members unless they do it in public or on a one-to-one basis. Under the open meeting law they cannot meet in privacy with a majority of school board members except under the strict provisions dictated by that law. Finally, they must learn how much they can rely on the superintendant (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970).

New school board members do not want to appear inadequate or lacking in knowledge in front of their peers or in front of their constituency. They must project an image in depth and breadth of knowledge whether they feel that way or not. In other words, they have to learn quickly, learn quietly, and learn in depth to become experts.

It is indeed a difficult task and yet, for the most part, one in which most of the new school board members engaged with some enthusiasm. By the their fourth month in office, they were calmer as a group, often giving the impression of being more knowledgeable than they were. Some of the experiences they have had during the past few months gives them the aura of veterans.

Considering that new school board members come from various occupations, that they apparently have few experiences of a similar kind which they could in fact have anticipated as a prior experience, it is a remarkable feat to have achieved such "command" of the office in so short a time.

Members of the school board are part of a small group and their interactions allow them to develop increased tolerance of others and their ideas and allow them also to change their impressions of

others. Parsons (1961) argues that in oder to survive as a small group, four needs must be met. They include the need for common identity and shared commitment to the values of the group. The group must also have the resources and skills necessary to reach the group's goals. The group must have rules which allow coordinated activity to accomplish the task and to maintain cohesion. Some control over members must also be evident.

School board members have a very public common identity--that of a group with limited membership. They have public funds to serve as resources to reach the common goal of improving the education of public school children. They, as members, have norms and protocols which allow them to coordinate activity and accomplish their tasks. The control over the school board may, in part, be found in the legal restraints under which they labor including the open meeting law as well as contitutional requirements. It is the legal restraints which assist them in reframing reality so that their actions in public fulfill control over the members. They must find methods to distillate reality in order to grow toward group cohesiveness if they are to accomplish the tasks of the group.

As a small group rich in history, substantially and solidly steeped with traditions (Counts, 1927; Campbell et al., 1965), school boards satisfy these requirements well. As the new school board members become more adept and experienced, some also become more forgiving of the shortcomings perceived in others. They mostly demonstrate less interpersonal intensity and somewhat less animosity with those with whom they must work, as the interviews clearly demonstrate. It is in part this factor which allows the new members to reframe reality by acceptance and increased tolerance of others.

It is not a different reality particularly, but it is filled with increasing insights, packed with the specific knowledges and heavy with perceptions gained from their exposure to the various groups with whom they interact--the superintendent and the administrative staff, the other school board members, their constituents, and their employee/constituents, the teachers. They have practiced their behaviors. There is significant change by the fourth and fifth months, which are confirmed again but more strongly in the tenth and eleventh months of tenure.

It takes considerable effort for a system like the school board to work. As members mature into their roles as board members and personalize the role somewhat, the earlier stresses begin to appear more manageable. The language from these interviews indicates some convergence toward moderation in their views. Very little is all good or all bad, and the realization of that is helpful. There is an old saying that says when you stick your head above the crowd you can see much better, but you also make a much better target, and new school board members now realize that as they have experienced it personally. New board members only five months into their tenure become aware of this notion of being a target and become more philosophical with regard to the most prominent groups with whom they interface. They understand that other, more experienced board members are human and may have a poiont on an issue or two, that no superintendent is perfect, that constituents also need reasonable responses to their requests, and that teachers are also key employees and that they range from very, very competent to less than competent. Their convergence

toward moderation may also demonstrate their increasing realization of the necessity of balanced treatment of those with whom they interface and that the treatment of them should be equitable and reasonable.

It is this growing understanding and interpretation of their duties and responsibilities of boardmanship which is increasingly more evident in their language. School boards as entities appear less fragile as small groups as new school board members become enculturated within the group.

In general, the literature regarding small groups is quite similar in its identification of the factors affecting group behavior and in requirements for their growth toward cohesion and the similarities provide a litany bordering on a refrain (Asch, 1956; Bales, 1950; Festinger, 1950; Hare, 1952; Parsons, 1961; Sherif, 1956).

As review, one of these pieces from the literature will be abbreviated here. Five features must emerge for a collection of individuals to develop into a small group. They must (a) interact with one another, (b) share common goals, (c) develop norms, (d) assume a set of roles, and (e) establish a network of interpersonal interaction (Sherif, 1956, Znaniecki, 1939).

All of these facets have been met in relationship to new school board member behaviors. They must interact with one another on a regular basis as officially elected officers of a governing board. They inevitably share the common goal of making decisions which will provide for the best free public education for all citizens though they may differ on methods for reaching that goal. There are norms

which have been historically nurtured in school boards, a mechanism of a culture developed and fostered over time which provides for its continuity. There are indeed roles which are expected to be accommodated, essentially institutionalizing some forms of public behavior in the group. In reaching decisions and in developing strategies for influencing other members they develop particular approaches. The group, over time, generally can be portrayed as stabilized and different from any other kind of small group through its behaviors.

By the eleventh month there was evidence of growing group cohesiveness in most of the boards. In all but one of the school boards there was clear evidence of the forces of cohesion described as receiving common stimuli, being subject to intra-board influence, responding to the constituency, and being required to act in public. These forces form a kind of adhesive for behavior forecasting, perhaps, future behaviors in increasing cohesiveness for new school board members as their tenure period continues. In this study is a model by which the process of the enculturation of school board members occurs. The model on the following page, Figure 1, is the synthesis. It may be explained in the following manner. During the periods as candidate and member-elect and oath-taking, potential new members exist within the rites of passage. Upon taking the oath of office, they learn the system or norms, learn the trade, the technical, cognitive, and self-analytic, reframe reality by tuning in to other forces, and converge toward cohesion through common stimuli, intra-board influence, action in public, and in response to the constituency.

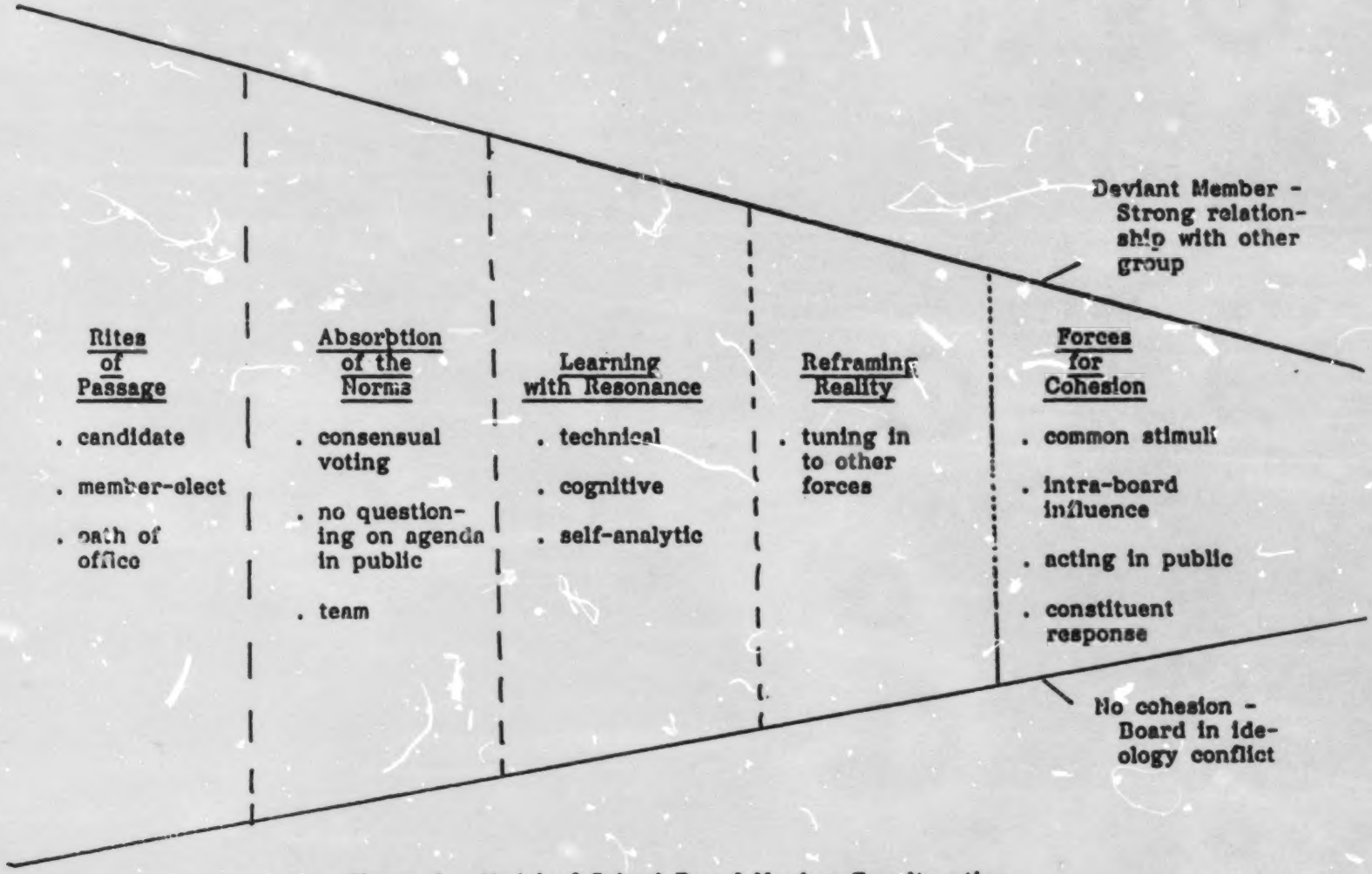

Figure 1. Model of School Board Member Enculturation.

IMPLICATIONS

There is in fact a traceable pattern which new school board members experience when they become members of the governing board. There is clearly a period of enculturation occurring prior to taking the oath of office and a prolonged period of enculturation which can be said to have been still in process at the culmination of the study. It is, as Moore (1969) explained, that adult socialization is a continuous process extending into the later years. It seems logical that this would be especially pertinent if one engages in new activities or new occupations. If school board memberships can be considered engaging in a new occupation for which this study makes a case, then the process of socialization into role will indeed occur. Actually, socialization is a learning process by which one becomes more knowledgeable about the area to be learned. As demonstrated in this study, the learning is not a formal process but one which the adult learner finds somewhat natural since it occurs out of a felt need to be competent in the role. Learning often improves one's confidence and as such it does not seem unusual that there is improved self-confidence displayed by new school board members by their eleventh month in office. Discussed in their language, there is demonstrated a definite lack of fear in the enterprise of membership and "boardsmanship."

As the literature indicates, adults in an occupation behave according to normal expectations. The normal expectations of new school board members are as they are described in this study and elsewhere in the literature relating to school board members. They behave the way they do even without the threat of external sanctions per se.

In order to prepare for an occupation one must be conditioned to do so whether one is positively oriented to do so or not. The rites of passage are a necessary stage which must be lived through in order to attain the desired goal of entry. Preparation for entry into membership may be, as Moore (1969) related in reference to occupation, a factor of conditioning to the difficulties or to the commitment required.

Implied in the role personalization process also are the learning of the norms or protocols of membership. Whether one favors or is at least neutral to the norms or whether one is, in fact, negatively disposed to them, new members in order to maintain membership must internalize the protocols at least partially. They must show disapproval of others who do not abide by the standards and feel guilt when personally not cooperating with the norms. There are many examples of these facets of the socialization literature shown in this study.

The factors manifested in the socialization process of new school board members occur within the context of a small group. The general behavior patterns which are evident in small groups is demonstrated as it affects the school board and particularly as it applies to new members.

Members of small groups behave in particular ways as they are socialized. The need for closely abiding by the norms of a small group are more intense than they would be when applied to a larger group. It is necessary to make this distinction since the socialization process can be more closely documented when studied within this context.

Recommendations for further research in school board member socialization generate the following questions:

1. Does the model work with appointed boards? If school board members are appointed, it should demonstrate the aspect of homogeneity if, in fact, members are appointed on that basis. Homogeneous groups have been found to come to agreement more easily. Appointed boards have been accused, as well of not being representative of the population in the school district, though accusations regarding elected boards have sometimes been similar. Are there then differences in the processes toward enculturation and socialization experienced by members of an appointed board?
2. Are there alternative theories to explain covergence? Other than the pertinent theories of the small group literature and the adult socialization literature, are there more appropriate methods to explain the phenomena of convergence?
3. Are the categories of learning sustained in replication? Is it possible to generalize the findings within the categories similar to those which one might discover in appointed boards, in boards in other parts of the country, only in rural areas or only in large cities, only in segregated or in desegregated districts, only with predominantly male boards or in predominantly female boards?
4. Under what conditions would more differentiated socialization influences be found? If all members were recruited to the board from various parts of the community or if there were

specific training for new members, as has been suggested by some researchers (Newbauer, 1980; Schuster, 1980), would the socialization factors be different? Although they are exposed to common stimuli currently, would the formalization of this stimuli make a difference in the time it would take for socialization to occur?

5. If interaction time among school board members were increased, would the group converge more quickly? For example, if school board members were provided more interaction time in the form of study sessions or goal-setting sessions and the like, would the group become more cohesive more quickly?

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